

# Jem and gender, Calpurnia and race: challenging and defying stereotypes in to kil...

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, multiple characters defy stereotypes made about them and are even able to change opinions and lifestyles of people around them. The book takes place in Maycomb County, Alabama during the 1930s. The book centers around one family: two children — Jem, the older brother, and Scout, the younger sister — Atticus the father, and their housekeeper, Calpurnia, . Because of the time and place in which the book takes place, many white supremacists hold stereotypes relating to race, gender, socioeconomic status, and religion. But, regardless of the setting, there are still some characters who are able to challenge these stereotypes. For example, Scout defies gender stereotypes by playing with boys and wearing overalls, rather than spending time doing stereotypical girl activities and wearing dresses. She creates change in the community by changing her aunt's outlook on gender stereotypes. Likewise, Calpurnia challenges racial stereotypes by being educated and able to educate others, as well as by being seen and treated as an equal in the Finch household. Calpurnia creates change in the community by making it easier to pray in church without being able to read and changing the way one white family views African American people. Scout is able to defy stereotypes about her gender and change the beliefs of her aunt, while Calpurnia defies is able to defy racial stereotypes and change the lives of the African American community and Finch family.

Notable for playing outside with her brother and male friend and wearing boys' clothes, Scout is able to challenge the stereotype that all girls should wear dresses and play indoors. Stereotypically, girls enjoy more gentle, quiet games, typically indoors, but not Scout. While talking about activities that

she enjoys, she says, " Jem and I always enjoyed the free run of Ms. Maudie's yard" (55). This proves that she defies her gender stereotypes because while many other 1930 Maycomb County girls are playing indoors with dolls or a tea set, Scout is running around and playing rougher games outdoors with her brother and " running free." Scout's aunt, Aunt Alexandra, holds these gender stereotypes and wants Scout to be more ladylike and wear dresses instead of overalls. After both Scout and Jem are almost killed, Aunt Alexandra helps Scout by taking off the costume she had been wearing and giving her clothes to put on. But even though she hates when Scout wears overalls, she gives them to her and says, "' Put these on, darling,' she said, handing me the garments she most despised" (354). This shows that Scout starts to change the stereotypes in the town because she is able to make one of the people holding this stereotype think that it is okay for her to wear masculine clothing, to the point where she even encouraged her to put them on, even though it is the item of clothing that she used to " most despise." The fact that Scout would rather wear boys' clothes proves that she is not a typical girl and challenges the stereotypes for her gender in her aunt's eyes. Scout is able to defy her gender stereotypes and change her aunt's opinion about how girls should act and dress.

By knowing how to read perfectly and teaching her son how to read, Calpurnia defies the stereotype held by white supremacists in Maycomb that all African American people are uneducated. This stereotype was most likely created because this book took place in a time and place when many African Americans did not have the opportunity to have an education equal to white

people. Calpurnia, however, was able to receive an education and even taught her son, Zeebo, how to read. Because she taught Zeebo how to read, they are able to help the people in their church who do not know how to read. They do this by call and repeat: Zeebo reads a line, the congregation repeats it, and so on. The author explains this by saying, "Zeebo cleared his throat and mumbled in a distant artillery 'There's a land beyond the river.' Miraculously on pitch, hundreds of voices sang out Zeebo's exact words" (161). The congregation doesn't have to be able to read the scripture, they just have to repeat "Zeebo's exact words." This shows how when one person knows how to read (and is able to teach another person), it can change the way hundreds of people pray. Because of Zeebo, they can all pray the hymns in the book that they otherwise would not be able to pray.

Calpurnia is also able to defy racial stereotypes and evoke change in Maycomb County by being treated as an equal in the Finch family. Calpurnia is their housekeeper, but she is also their only maternal figure, so when Scout is mad at Calpurnia for scolding her for behavior, Atticus defends Calpurnia by saying, "I've no intention of getting rid of her, now or ever. We couldn't operate a single day without Cal" (33). Typically in Maycomb County, the housekeeper is seen only as a provider of services, but is very rarely the maternal figure of the family. In the Finch family, they rely so much on her that Atticus thinks that they would, "not be able to go a day without her." Calpurnia is able to affect racial stereotypes by being educated and serving as an equal in the Finch household, and therefore changes the way the

people in her church pray and one white family views her status as an African American person.

Scout and Calpurnia defy stereotypes and change certain aspects of the town in which they live. Scout, is able to change the sexist, gender-restricting beliefs of her aunt. Calpurnia changes the way hundreds of people pray and how one white family views African American people. Just two people defying stereotypes can change the beliefs and lives of many people in their community.